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Seminar Report

The Psychology of Greeks

A Historical Approach

by

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Abstract

This report aims to trace the origins of some characteristics that can be found to the psychology of the Greek population. The argumentation is based on historical facts, which had a huge impact on the psyche of the people, because of their brutality and the adverse social conditions that they created. It is an attempt to sketch the Greek character by examining each historical period independently and from the perspective of the people, who experienced the events, which eventually led them to adopt certain behaviours. However, it is by no means an attempt to diminish and simplify the complexity of the human psyche and the uniqueness of every human being.

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Introduction

This report attempts to describe and analyse the formation of the character of the modern Greeks and the reasons behind this process, which led the people to adopt certain behaviours.

To begin with, Greece is a country situated in the south-east corner of Europe and a member of the European Union. Its location is strategically of a great importance, since it is at the crossroads of three continents - Europe, Asia and Africa. This is one of the reasons why Greece over the history was desirable by many conquerors who wanted to control the area.

During the years, Greeks have gone through many phases, each one different from the other, and not only they influenced and inspired other civilisations, but they also were influenced by other civilisations. There are only a handful of countries (areas) in the world that have such a long history like Greece has.

Some elements of the Modern Greek character remained unchanged from the ancient times and can be attributed to the ancient Greeks, while there are others that were evolving, changing and adapting to the temporal needs of the circumstances.

Since Greece has a history which goes back to the ancient times, I would like to turn our attention to its modern history, because these periods have influenced the Greek character the most, according to its present form, and a lot of information, considering the area and these phases, is available.

Historical Overview

Prehistoric time (earliest to 1100 BC)

The history of Greece can be traced back to the Stone Age (270,000 BC), where all of the three stages (Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic) are represented. The first advanced civilisations, not only in the region, but also in the whole of Europe, appeared around 3200 BC, beginning with the Cycladic civilisation in the islands of the Aegean Sea, the Minoan civilisation in Crete (2700-1500 BC) and the Mycenaean civilisation on the mainland (1900-1100 BC).

Ancient Greece (1100 BC – 330 AD)

The ancient Greek history consists of the *geometric period* (ca. 1100 BC – 700 BC), the *archaic period* (ca. 800 BC – 480 BC), the *classical period* (500 BC – 300 BC), the *Hellenistic period* (323 BC – 30 BC) and the *Greco-Roman period* (30 BC – 330 AD). In all of these periods not only great things occurred in the region both in the intellectual and the scientific world (construction of the Parthenon, philosophy, mathematics, the 'creation' of the city-state etc.), but also many wars took place (Greco-Persian war, Peloponnesian war etc.). Christianity inherited many ideas of the ancient Greeks and was also influenced by their way of thinking and their philosophy.

Medieval Period (330 AD – 1453 AD)

The Medieval Period begins after the founding and the transfer of the capital city of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople and ends with the capture of the capital of the Byzantine Empire (Constantinople) by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. It was a period with many advances in science, art, literature, music, religion, gastronomy etc. The Byzantine Empire is characterised by the blending of Greek, Roman and Oriental elements. In addition, the advances in the field of arts inspired later the Italian renaissance.

'Living' History (1453 AD – present)

The period after 1453 AD and the 'Fall of Constantinople' can be described as the *living history*, since it has formed and influenced the most the character of the modern Greeks. It can be divided into the *Modern Time* and *Contemporary Greece*.

Modern Time

The Modern Time in the history of Greece consists of three different sets of time periods. The first is the Ottoman Rule which lasted almost 400 years (1453 AD – 1821 AD) and was followed by the Greek Revolution (1821 AD – 1827 AD). The third period of the Modern Time starts with the independence of Greece from the Ottomans (1827 AD – 1914 AD) and ends after the First World War. It can also be described as the period of the Modern Greek State.

Contemporary Greece

The history of contemporary Greece starts after the WWI and goes until the present. Some important moments for the formation of the Greek 'identity' as it is today were the WWII (1940 AD -1945 AD), the Greek Civil War that followed and the Greek Military Dictatorship (1967 AD – 1974 AD).

Influences from the ancient ancestors

There are very few countries in the world that have such a great history like Greece and they still have managed to maintain not only their language, but also their mentality. While studying the ancient Greek texts, someone might be surprised by how 'present' some issues are and will realise that people have not changed that much during the last millennia.

Some characteristics have passed from generation to generation and they can still be identified in the people's way of reacting to some situations. To begin with, Greeks have believed even from the ancient times that they are a distinct historical nation. It is surprising how this idea has not faded away and it actually was reinforced by the modern history of Greece. Hence, they carry a sense of pride both for their ancestors and their countrymen.

Moreover, the Greeks do not like to be told what to do, they have a fighting spirit and great love for freedom, culture and democracy. This can be seen to the civilisation they created, with numerous works of art, temples, fortified cities, tombs and the great heritage they left behind to the rest of the world. Even, nowadays, during the economic crisis, the Greeks spend money, time, and energy and take initiatives for the promotion and development of the cultural field, a fact that proves their love and passion for, and importance of maintaining their culture.

They are inspired by their history and by various fights defending their ideals. The Greeks have always used arts to surpass difficulties; they feel the need to express their emotions and thoughts through poetry, theatre, music. That's one of the reasons why tragedy has a major role in Greeks' culture, even from the pre-Christian era.

Meanwhile, the optimistic point of view of life gave birth to festivals and celebrations originating to the ancient times and still being very popular, as an integral part of the tradition.

Furthermore, the Greeks seek for harmony, moderation, truth, beauty, wisdom, justice and humanism. This can be found to all of the expressions of human culture, from the architecture of the cities to the equity of the juridical system in Greece, which value more than anything the fundamental human rights and freedoms.

One of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece, Chilon of Sparta, used to teach the people that in order to find joy in life and not to get punished by the gods, they should *'limit their actions'* and not be greedy. Another one of his famous quotations is *to 'know yourself'*. Here, translated in English, it does not actually enclose the whole original meaning. The ancient Greeks in the end of each day, before going to rest, they used to sit down and think about what they did during the day, under a very critical scope and point of view. Thus, by critically examining their actions, they could get to know themselves better and improve their weaknesses. In addition, by *knowing yourself*, you could learn limiting your actions. That kind of a 'habit' has still remained in the Modern Greek's mindset.

Figure 1 Chilon of Sparta, one of the Seven Sages of ancient Greece

Another characteristic of the Greek psyche is the calmness and the heroism (in the form it can be expressed today) they show, when they have to face difficult, stressing and troubled situations. While, they turn to be imaginative and inventive in order to overcome the problems of everyday life.

Furthermore, they show low political unity and are prone to disagreements, which can be attributed to their desire to doubt almost everything and not to show blind trust. This can be seen to the variety of political parties that are not only represented in the parliament, but also take part in the elections. For instance, in the U.S.A, there are only two political parties, which share the same fundamental ideas (limited options).

Last but not least, due to the country's climate, morphology and natural beauty, Greeks are very friendly and outgoing. People often mention the 'Greek hospitality' as something special. In the ancient times the hosts in order to show their hospitality to their visitors, they even used to wash their feet.

All of the above experienced a strong impact from Christianity, which improved the anthropocentric substance of the Greek mentality. On the other hand, Christianity was greatly influenced by the Greek philosophy.

The Age of Byzantium (330 AD – 1453 AD)

Hellenic, Roman and Eastern elements merged under the influence of Christianity and gave birth to the most remarkable of all medieval cultures, the Byzantine one. Apart from Christianity, as a common religion, the second binding factor for so many different nations, beliefs, traditions, habits and ethic principles to one unity, was also the Greek language.

The average man of that period, who had grown up with the ancient Greek cultural background, had to make a great effort, in order to conform to the new principles. The transition from democracy of the ancient times to the Christian Empire of Byzantium, caused perplexity and raised questions and doubts to the population about their Governors credibility. Namely the Emperor and the Patriarch were both beyond any public control, criticism and accounting for their rule. Moreover the Patriarch was the representative of the one and only God, while every day life aimed to the salvation of the soul, through continuous ethical practice, imposed by this newly adopted religion.

The above mentioned, 'new status' of public and personal life introduced incredible changes and expelled everything that was not in accordance with Christianity from everyday life. Intellectual consistency, unified thinking and decision-making based on the new religion, were requested. Even if the new teaching was completely different than that of the antiquity, two main characteristics spoke to the heart of the Byzantine people, which originated from the ancient Greek civilisation. These are love for every human being and love for peace.

On the other hand, the Age of Byzantium had also a dark side, characterized often by conspiracies among the dynasties which shared the throne. This had an impact on people's way of thinking, who, in order to protect themselves, acted only after complex, scholastic discussions and thorough thinking, the so called *Byzantinismus*.

The Ottoman Rule (1453 AD – 1821 AD)

After having chronologically ordered the history of Greece, it is important to examine each period of the Modern Time and Contemporary Greece independently in order to be in position to draw some conclusions.

The fall of Constantinople was followed by centuries of slavery under the Ottoman Rule. The Greek people experienced a regime of oppression, humiliation and often persecution for the first two centuries, but showed immense strength to keep alive national consciousness, unity and patriotism.

Initially, poverty was so intense that the people were in no condition to think of a possible better life. The nations' mentality got most unfavourably affected and the Greeks' love for knowledge and progress were temporarily frustrated and almost disappeared. The fact that the cultural life virtually vanished and children were not taught any more how to read and write their language was a catastrophic state of intellectual affairs for a nation with a rich cultural background.

Moreover, the dynamism which had marked the nation in the antiquity and the medieval times, gave way to a mood of passive acceptance of fate. Fatalism and despair took the place of the Greeks' traditionally optimistic view of life. An oppressive psychological situation, which inevitably reacted unfavourably upon the people's moral, was created.

At this point, the Orthodox Church played a major role in the maintenance of awareness and awakening of the nation. Greeks turned gradually to trade and shipping and achieved significant progress in the economic field. The improvement of living conditions helped people to recover self – confidence and enhanced the struggle for liberty.

It took a long time to accomplish the desire for freedom and independence, but it is definite that Greeks cannot stand enslavement. Sooner or later they are ready to sacrifice themselves for the nation's ideals and the common good.

Nevertheless this period of the Greek history bears major consequences with an evident highly unfortunate mark upon Greek life even of our days. Slavishness can be still traced in the behaviour of some Greeks, which is in full discrepancy with their original sense of pride and confidence.

Figure 2 Bishop Germanos of old Patras blessing the Greek flag at Agia Lavra on the outset of the national revolt against the Ottoman Turks on 25 March, 1821. *Theodoros Vryzakis, 1852*

The Greek Modern State (1827 AD – 1914 AD)

The Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Rule started in 1821 AD and lasted 8 whole years. In the end, Greeks gained their independence and in 1830 AD Greece was an internationally recognised State. The years that followed were pretty harsh. Greece looked like a deserted landscape and the

people's economic condition was desperately bad. In addition, local revolutions, unsuccessful wars and other national problems, provoked the Greek people and army's patriotic feelings .The Great Powers got involved and instead of providing real solutions to this difficult situation, they made things even worse and more complicated. They created not only conflicts between the Greeks and other States, but also within them. Thus, the Greek people were constantly living with insecurity and they always had to be prepared for wars. Of major importance is the catastrophic war in Asia Minor, which resulted to a complete tragedy for the Greek population of that region and Eastern Thrace. More than one million and a half Greeks were forced to leave their ancestral homes immediately and under conditions of utter destitution. Their resettlement on Greek soil faced immense difficulties and the so called Refugee Problem caused severe depression upon the country's people for tens of years.

Obviously, the above historical facts exhausted the population both physically but mostly mentally. At that crucial moment, the Greek fighting spirit made its appearance again. People made a new start working hard, in order, primarily, to survive and secondly to recover so that the following generations would not have to undergo the same difficult situations. Every member within a family was trying his/her best, having in mind the common good. This strengthened the bonds between the family members, which were traditionally already strong, in order to protect the younger members from misfortune and misery.

Finally, once again, the love for freedom is depicted through the Greek National Anthem, which is a poem written in 1823 by Dionysios Solomos. It is also called *Hymn to Freedom*, because it actually talks about the braveness and the fighting spirit of the Greeks for their freedom. Characteristic was also the motto *Freedom or Death*, which was widely spread during the Greek Revolution.

World War II

When the second world crisis was obviously approaching, Greece intended to remain strictly neutral and stay as long as possible out of the war. Even though Great Powers (Britain and France) guaranteed the integrity of Greece, there were many doubts that this statement would be proved ineffective in a moment of real need. It is well known that Greece underwent an offensive attack by highly superior, in numbers, forces and was the first country to fight back successfully the Axis Powers. As Greeks withstood the first attacks, the free world was impressed by this victory and strengthened their will to defend democracy against fascism. During the period of the occupation, living conditions became terribly difficult for the Greek people, who paid an extremely heavy price for their resisting action.

It was the fight of a small country and of a nation which struggled for its honour and dignity, as well as for the basic principles of the civilized world and the human rights.

The unprovoked destruction of the country, the horrible suffering together with the hundreds of thousands of dead people, the cruel behaviour and the whole evil experienced during WW II, have left deep marks on the Greek soul. Privation and hardship led people, after the end of the war, to a continual aim to property acquisition. Poverty brought to light the dark side of people's heart, in many cases. Fear directed undignified behaviour and caused enmity among the people.

During this period of depression, acts of treachery, dishonour and indignity were not rare. Individuals cooperated with the rulers mainly as informants and they used to 'snitch' on others. These actions caused many arrests and executions of the local people at the time, were treated as a betrayal and that

person as a quisling. As a result, giving information to the authorities about fellow citizens is regarded for Greeks as an embarrassing, unacceptable, harmful and antisocial behaviour. In other European countries people have a completely different consideration and believe that their duty is to report everything to the authorities.

In addition, the unexpected conduct of the country's friends and allies, throughout the WW II showed up their real motives, disappointing and reducing the degree of confidence among them and Greeks once more.

The above mentioned results are very clear on the generation which experienced the WW II and consequent characteristics dominate their overall behaviour, while they have passed their views and their stories to the younger.

It should be pointed out that Greek people have gone through most wars and fights by defending their country, their freedom and their humanistic ideals, and not by starting expansionistic wars.

Military Dictatorship (1967 – 1974)

After the two World Wars and the Greek Civil War against communism, which aimed to control the Soviet expansionism, the country faced great economical and political difficulties again. As the political leadership entered a period of decadence and was unable to rise above personal and parties' political considerations, a Military Government took by force the political power and a seven years long dictatorship started.

Political freedom was restricted, the country experienced isolation and inactivity in all cultural aspects. Once more Greek people experienced oppression and their love for freedom was tested. Their fighting spirit and rebellious nature guided people to rise against the authorities. Students 'started the fire' and showed the way to bring dictatorship to an end. They took control of the main building of the Technical University of Athens and triggered the protestation, asking for *"bread, education and freedom"* [(1)]. During those events, blood 'had to be shed' and many people (the exact number is not defined; some mention 39, while others 83 deaths) 'had to be killed' in order for democracy to be established once again in Greece.

The Present

Political parties in Greece have always cultivated fanaticism, hate and all kinds of contradictions among the citizens, leading to political instability. In fact governments, proved over time to be unable to work and apply truly effective policies in favour of the people who voted them into power. The power actually has always been in the hands of a few privileged families or economical interests, which were controlled and directed by foreign 'powers'.

Political instability is worsened by the frequent interventions of the Great European Powers in Greek political affairs. For both strategic and economic reasons, attribute to Greece great importance and wish to influence the progress of the country.

Thus it becomes quite evident why Greeks find it so difficult to improve their lives. They have been 'forced' numerous times to make decisions that are against their national interests.

Moreover, globalisation had another big impact on the mentality of the people, since new foreign habits were introduced to the Greeks, like consumption, luxurious lifestyle, 'shopping therapy' etc. that were never actually part of the national tradition. Fortunately, for every action there is a reaction, 10 years after the emergence of the phenomenon of globalisation, people start wanting to reach back to their roots, their tradition, to be and to act more rationally.

Meanwhile, the economic crisis brought forth the real value of Humanism to the affected societies. Greeks in accordance to Humanisms' principles and their Orthodox faith, have a high sense of solidarity. It must be pointed out that solidarity for Greeks is the spontaneous attitude to offer a helping hand to anybody, who is in need, because they believe that this is fair and not because they expect to get something in return. I would describe it as an *altruistic social duty*; a task for the society.

Conclusion

To sum up the ideas included above, Greeks from the ancient times got used to live with life's difficulties and not being stressed by them. They tried to be adaptive, find solutions and never to give up, and that is how they developed a sense of self-confidence, believing that they can make it through, no matter what. This belief explains the calmness that characterizes them, which could be one of the sources of the stereotype, which wants the *Greek people to be lazy*.

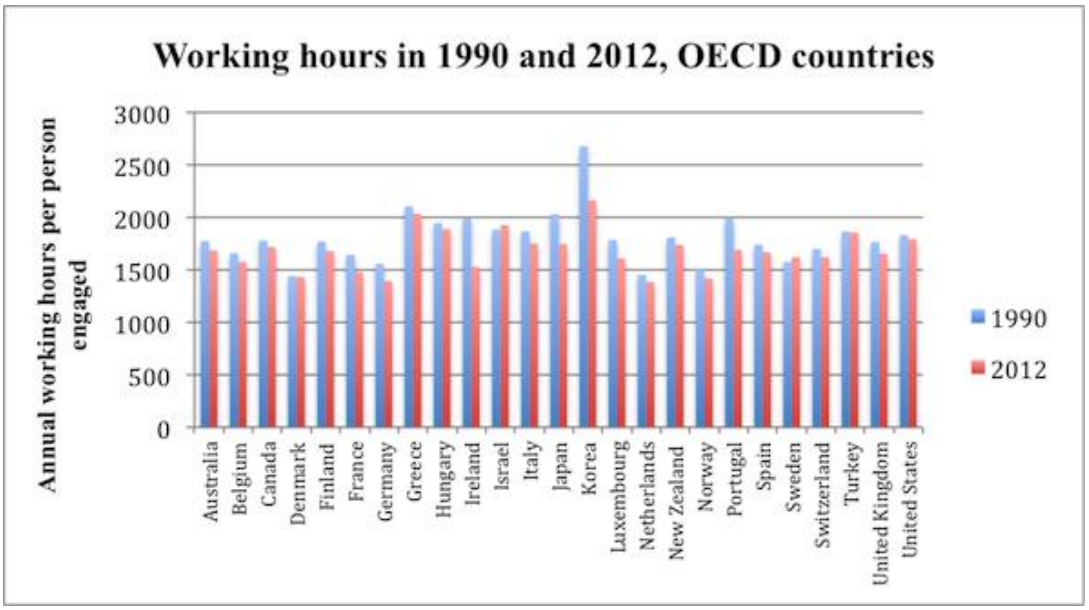

Figure 3 The hardest working countries in the world, *Economist (2013)*

The above statistics, taken from the *Economist*, contradict the argument, which wants the Greek people to be lazy. Greece used to be the second most hard-working country in the world in 1990 and in 2012 still held that place.

One reason for the reproduction of this unfounded statement, more and more often could lie on the fact that Greeks do not tend to *show off* or *advertise themselves*. They know what their value is and keep it for their own good knowledge. Furthermore, they do not present themselves as a European elite or aristocrats, like what in other European countries people do.

Moreover, Greeks are pretty curious human beings, which can also be seen by the early development of ship construction in order to explore the seas and the ends of the world. They were always very keen on travelling and exploring their 'limits'. At this point, one might add that the more cultures, languages, lifestyles etc. you get to know, the better you understand your own culture and the stronger the love for your own tradition becomes, thus justifying their love for their history and culture.

Other characteristics of the Greeks are their solidarity and their directness. As people, they mostly are person-oriented and relationship-oriented, which means that they value people over materialism and relations over tasks, respectively. As a matter of fact, the extended nature of the family can found its origin on these two orientations.

According to the time management, Greeks are mostly polychronic, since they like to run many parallel activities, in order to avoid the everyday routine, and are used to unexpected 'change of plans', making them pretty flexible with their plans. Moreover, in Greece there is not a great need for specialisation, because there are not so many specialized industries. On the other hand, there is a need for people who are capable of doing many different things in order for the society to function well.

Furthermore, Greeks are very friendly, open and outgoing people. The Greek hospitality is pretty well-known as a major characteristic of the country. At this point is interesting to mention that people in earlier years used to sleep with *unlocked* windows and doors, and during the summer even with *open* windows and doors. This also lies to low criminality.

Finally, modern Greeks are considered to be well educated and multilingual. They value education very high and this is a reason why the level of the education in schools and universities is considered to be pretty high. Traditionally Greek parents are willing even to suffer deprivation in favour of their children's education. Moreover, since only a few people speak Greek, there is the necessity for Greeks to learn other languages in order to communicate with people from different cultures and exchange ideas, although the fact that many modern languages have borrowed numerous words from the Greek language.

To end with, it should be pointed out that, nowadays, what concerns Greeks the most is not the economic crisis, but the crisis of the principles and ethics of the people, who are confused (1) culturally by the new 'habits' introduced to them and (2) politically by the government's indifference towards that *moral-values-crisis*.

Note 1: That was their slogan, which was written not only on banners, but also on the walls of the city; bread actually refers to the basic nutritional needs.

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